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ABSTRACT

The roundtable reported in this document was intended to identify cross-cultural themes in education and support the growth of a network of international scholars. The roundtable included: (1) reports on partnerships among families, communities, and schools in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Spain, Portugal, Singapore, and Australia; (2) presentations on research and practice concerning educational partnerships in the United States; (3) discussion of a cross-cultural study of parent involvement in Austria, Taiwan, and the United States; and (4) an open discussion. Prominent roundtable themes reported in this document include strategies for making academic and social success a reality for all children; transitions between home and school and between educational levels; and family and community participation in schools. Ten references are cited in the preface of the document. Lists of visitors to, and participants in, the roundtable are appended. (BC)

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THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON FAMILY-COMMUNITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS APRIL 1991

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The Third International Roundtable on Family-Community-School Partnerships, sponsored by the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning and the Institute for Responsive Education, convened at Sheraton Plaza in Chicago, Illinois, on the afternoon of April 2, 1991. This conference was intentionally held in close proximity to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, April 3-7.

The purposes of the roundtable include the following:

- to facilitate information exchanges between scholars from different countries working in the area of family-community-school collaboration;
- to familiarize scholars in this field with each other's work;
- to identify cross-cultural themes within the field;
- to support the growth and effectiveness of the Center on Families' Network of International Scholars.

This year's Roundtable included more than twenty brief presentations by educational researchers from five continents. The program was structured as follows:

I. Don Davies and Joyce Epstein, Co-Directors of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, made opening comments and invited participants to introduce themselves.

II. International Perspectives on Family-School-Community Partnerships included focus sections on Eastern Europe, Latin America, Spain and Portugual, Singapore and Australia, and a cross-cultural study of parent involvement in Austria, Taiwan, and the United States.

III. Ten scholars made brief presentations on Research and Practice in Family-School-Community Partnerships in the United States.

IV. The conference closed with an open discussion on possibilities for collaboration and comparative studies and was followed by a wine and cheese reception and dinner at a nearby restaurant.

The Research and Development Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, which sponsored the roundtable, is supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation enabled scholars from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Chile, Portugual, Spain, Singapore, Australia, and Austria to participate in the Roundtable, attend the AERA meeting, and visit the Institute for Responsive Education, Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, and selected schools in Boston.

THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON FAMILY-COMMUNITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS APRIL 1991

by Scott Thompson
Institute for Responsive Education

Preface by Don Davies and Joyce Epstein
Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning

PREFACE

"It takes a whole village to raise a child."

This African proverb was the theme of the conference reported in this publication – the Third Annual International Roundtable on Family-Community-School Partnerships held in Chicago in April of 1991.

The saying captures the spirit of the meeting and its participants from around the world who are trying in many different ways to study and actively promote better connections between all the parts of a child's world – his or her own village – in order that more of these children will succeed socially and academically.

The proverb also captures the ethos of the Roundtable's two sponsors: the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning and the Institute for Responsive Education.

The Roundtable was the first activity for the International Network of Scholars, formed by the Center on Families in 1990 and 1991 to provide for exchange of research and ideas across national boundaries. The third annual Roundtable built on the foundation established in the first two meetings: April 1989 in San Francisco and April 1990 in Boston. Each of these Roundtables has been held in conjunction with annual conference of the American Educational Research Association.

At the first Roundtable meeting in San Francisco, the forty-five participants were surprised and intrigued by the commonality of some of their concerns across the boundaries of at least eleven countries. There was widespread interest in problems and studies relating to socially marginal populations: new immigrants, Gypsies, displaced people, and people with limited proficiency in the country's principal language. Additionally, there was broad interest in studies that sought the family and community perspective on matters of home-school relations.

The 1990 Boston Roundtable saw a continuation of an emphasis on at-risk and economically disadvantaged parents. Literacy and family contributions to children's language development were themes explored in several reports. Participants from several countries noted their interest in projects bringing together education and other social services and in projects in which researchers are working in schools with parents and teachers on an extended basis.

The prominent themes you will find in this report include family and community participation in schools, transitions (such as the transition from home to school or from primary to

secondary education) and strategies for making social and academic success a reality for all children.

The International Network is devoted to the idea that all countries should do more to improve the development and education of all children, especially those that are now being failed in so many ways by the institutions designed to serve them. More will be accomplished for these children, and all others, if families and communities work with schools and with each other to promote their success and to seek changes in policies and practices that will sustain this approach.

We view the "inter-institutional connections of the school, family, and community as a set of overlapping spheres of influence on children's learning and development" (Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning proposal to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, June 15, 1990). This theoretical framework developed by Joyce Epstein (1987) draws on and extends the ecological model of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), the sociological perspectives of families as educators of Leichter (1974), the sociological perspectives on the connections between institutions and individuals (Litwak and Meyer, 1974), the partnership thesis advanced by Seeley (1981), and the long tradition of sociological and psychological research on school and family environments and their effects (Coleman, et. al., 1977; Epstein and McPartland, 1979, and many others). Other scholars we have drawn significantly from include James Comer (1980), Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1978), and Annette Lareau (1989).

Through the Network and events such as the Roundtable we want to test and improve this framework by drawing on theory and research in other countries and by encouraging new studies that look at family, community, and school connections in multiple environments, use diverse methodologies and perspectives, and are conducted in many different cultural settings. We found that the presentations given at this year's Roundtable all fit under three broad themes: 1. Academic and Social Success for All; 2. Transitions; 3. Participation. The report that follows is largely structured around these themes.

We hope that readers of this report will capture the excitement of people who come together across boundaries of nations and language but are joined in a common interest in improving the lives of children worldwide, through research and applying research in real world settings.

Note: The fourth annual Roundtable is scheduled for San Francisco on April 20, 1992. Readers interested in the International Network of Scholars or the Roundtable are invited to write or call the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215; 617-353-3309.

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I. Academic and Social Success for All

During her presentation (which is discussed in more detail in a later section of this report) Johanna Filp of Santiago, Chile, made the following observation about the current state of education in her country: "The challenge we are facing now, especially regarding childhood, is how to create an education that leads us beyond survival. I think the question is now quality of life, quality of education, equity, and participation."

Dr. Filp went on to describe the conditions that force this question: "Some statistics to show you the kind of problems we're dealing with: We have about 1,700,000 children between zero and the age of six and 340,000 of these children live in extreme poverty. That means that they live in shacks, no water, no light, usually up to seven people in one room, no food – most of the people eat three times a week. We have problems of malnutrition, child mortality, and of course problems in the quality of life of children. If you look at education, we don't have the problem of access to basic education. A hundred percent of the children at school age have the possibility to enter school, but you have the highest failure rate in grade one, especially in the poor areas. When you go on and look at the school achievements you find large disparities between income groups, and you find that the poorest ten percent of the children have a fifty-three percent achievement in the language test in grade four. . . ." It's for similar reasons that scholars from many parts of the world are seeking new ways to improve the academic and social success of all children through home-school-community collaboration.

An example of how this kind of improvement can begin to be realized is the Partnership for Family Reading program that Ruth Handel of Montclair State College reported on. The program is located at eighteen schools in urban northern New Jersey. This intervention and prevention project is designed to help families support the academic achievement of their young children, and specifically their literacy achievement. What distinguishes the program from many others, Dr. Handel reports, "is that it's a program that looks to the reading improvement of the adults as well as the youngsters. In other words, it takes the stance that in order for the adults to truly help improve their children's literacy . . . they need to experience, or in some cases re-experience, important literacy events themselves."

In this program, parents are invited into the school to participate in a workshop that exposes them to interesting children's literature and learn reading strategies with the literature. Then the experience is replicated with their own children. In the

program's four years it has been found that families involved are reading more at home and making greater use of the library, and, perhaps what's most significant, they are enjoying all of this. Dr. Handel explained that the program specifically links instruction with enjoyment. Adult family members are enjoying the literature and enjoying establishing a reading relationship with their children.

Oliver Moles, of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), reported on a project with a similar, if more broadly focused, approach to improving student success. Dr. Moles points out that there's much evidence to suggest that substantial student gains could be produced by helping school staffs to assist families in improving the home educational environment. This is the aim of the OERI project that Dr. Moles reported on: "Schools Helping Urban Parents Strengthen Home Learning." The project involves the development of a source book for the training of educators to assist their students' families, and then trying them out in a few school districts to see how useful they are.

Along comparable lines, Sam Redding of the Academic Development Institute, reported on an effort in 125 schools (about half of them in Chicago) to improve student outcomes through family education: "Family Study Institute." Dr. Redding's remarks included the following observation: "Along the way in work in parent education, we arrived at another revelation that will probably surprise none of you, and that's that it's one thing to educate particular parents, but it's tough for them to sustain the benefits, unless the children are attending a school that is attentive to the involvement of parents as a way the school operates -- a semblance of community." Out of this recognition came another project: "Alliance for Achievement Network," a network of Illinois schools trying a model for developing and sustaining a sense of community in the school.

Luis Souta of Escola Superior de Educacao in Setubal, Portugal spoke of the challenge of making family-school-community partnerships the cornerstone of a multicultural school. The "Various Cultures in One School Project" is a longitudinal study sited in a unique public school near Lisbon with a high percentage of students from African nations that were formerly Portuguese colonies including Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, St. Tome, and Principe. The project is designed to explore strategies for infusing multiculturalism into the structure and pedagogy of the school to promote the success of all children.

Issues of multiculturalism and family-school-community partnerships are becoming hot topics in Portugal, Dr. Souta explained. In most countries, such as the United States, the two

themes have developed as separate rather than complementary reform strategies. Souta and colleagues are working to demonstrate that a school's ethnic diversity should be approached as a resource rather than an obstacle to building home-school-community partnerships.

II. Transitions

In Czechoslovakia -- as Jan Prucha of the Institute for Educational and Psychological Research in Prague explained -- family-school-community collaboration was legally impossible during forty years of communist totalitarian rule. The rapid and dramatic political *transition* from communism to democracy, known as "the velvet revolution," has opened the doors to all kinds of *educational* transitions. As Czechs set out to reconstruct their entire system of education -- transitioning from state-run bureaucratic schools to locally-governed community schools -- the whole area of family and community involvement has become indisputably relevant (pursued further in the section on Participation).

In Poland, as well, as we learned from Jerzy Pomianowski of Warsaw, nationwide political changes are paving the way for radical educational reform (again, see section on Participation). Attention to the subject of transitions in many other parts of the world is on a more intricate and less dramatic scale. One area of work concerns the transition of young children into early education or from early education into elementary level schooling. Other transitional concerns that need continued investigation include: elementary to middle school; middle school to high school; high school to college or career. Connecting families with schools, of course, is a crucial process involving transitions. Not all of these areas of study were represented in the Roundtable.

A fascinating example of what was represented is Diane Scott-Jones' research on adolescent child-bearing -- a study that is being conducted under the auspices of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning. Dr. Scott-Jones believes the area of adolescent child-bearing relates to home-community-school connections in two major ways: 1) the role of these connections in helping adolescent mothers stay in school; 2) the role of these connections in the development and education of children born to adolescent mothers. "Many adolescent mothers return to school when their young child enters first grade, and they no longer have child-care problems," Dr. Scott-Jones observed. "So at a time when the young child is making an important transition, and needs a lot of parental support, the mother herself may be making a transition -- that is, resuming her

own schooling, and is also in need of support for her own education."

Dr. Scott-Jones' research project involves the examination of the development and education of adolescent mothers and their young children via child-care programs at public schools. This work is being carried out at three sites involving Hispanic, black, and white populations. One early finding is that blacks tend to be more resilient in maintaining their educational level when they bear children. In concluding her report, Dr. Scott-Jones said, "We must understand families as they exist in all their variety in order to understand the connections that exist among families, communities, and schools and to understand how these connections might be strengthened and used to improve the educational levels of all children." She also noted that the marginalization of certain ethnic groups within society -- and reflected in schools -- is a common pattern across continents.

Johanna Filp of Centro de Investigacion y Desarrollo de las Educacion in Santiago, Chile also made a presentation that was very much focused on transitions. Her work involves the development of a program helping poor urban children make the transition from home to school. It is modeled on the educacion popular tradition, having a parent-community orientation when the children are 0-4; for children at ages 5-8, the program works with parents, preschool teachers, and primary school teachers. It includes a training component. Through a qualitative research approach -- objective hermeneutic -- children are accompanied in their transition from preschool to first grade.

During a question and answer period, Marilyn Merritt of U.S. Agency for International Development asked Dr. Filp the following: "You said that you get nearly a hundred percent of the children in first grade and yet you also said that a large percentage of the first graders don't pass. You are focusing on this transition period. Can you say something about what seems to make a difference between those who are succeeding and those who aren't?"

Dr. Filp: "What happens in the family, that's the first part. And after you isolate that factor what happens in the classroom is crucial, and the teaching style of the teacher plays a very important role. And what we discovered from our research . . . is that you don't need big revolutions to make better education, you just need common sense . . . like reasonable expectations for the students. Through the Ministry [of Education] there's a program to improve education in the ten percent of the poorest schools in the country. And that's a program which deals with equity, and what we do there is give school books, because mostly they don't have school books; teacher training in terms of how to teach these

children how to read and write -- taking into consideration that they don't have that experience at home, so they make the transition from oral to written language which is crucial."

Joyce Epstein: "Those are all themes that will resonate in various ways in this room. I think one of themes that . . . Johanna has pointed out, is a theme that our Center is very interested in watching and seeing how we can pull this together over time, and that is the involvement of the community -- in the birth to eight years old or in the community-type-center. This integration of services from the community to families and the schools so that these pieces come together for children is a high, unknown factor."

Ko Peng Sim of the Institute on Education, Singapore, reported on a project funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation called, "A Study of the Cognitive and Social Development of Preschool Children in Singapore." The project seeks to answer the following questions:

- How much do our children know or can they do at the age of 3-6?
- What are the strengths and limitations of Singapore pre-schoolers with respect to selected areas of development?
- In what way does home environment contribute to a child's development?
- Do preschool centers make a difference?
- How can schools and parents work together to enhance children's development?
- In what way can community resources be utilized to facilitate learning?

Dr. Ko reported on some of the main findings of the first phase of the project (collection of baseline data):

- Singapore children are well developed in mathematics, but need help in languages, especially English.
- They behave and think like children of their age -- as studies elsewhere have found.
- Language correlates positively with mathematics and cognitive development.
- Children develop pro-social behavior in response to adults' suggestions.
- Preschool centers do make a difference.
- Home and parental influence is evident in many cases.

During the follow-up question period, Dr. Filp asked the following: "You mentioned that parents can choose the preschool for their children. At least in Chile that only happens for the high-income groups, and I was wondering -- in your country -- does this happen for the whole population?"

Dr. Ko explained that all parents are selective, but wealthier parents have more options because they can pay for private schools.

Derek Toomey of the Centre for the Study of Community, Education and Social Change at La Trobe University in Australia reported on his study of U.K. literature contrasting projects that involve parents in assisting their children's reading development by listening to them read (with minimal, if any, parent training) and otherwise similar projects that involve specific parent training. This area of study involves two important transitions: 1) the child's transition from home to school, and 2) parents' involvement in children's learning and schooling. A particularly interesting finding that Dr. Toomey reported is that follow-up to training of parents was found to be at least as important as the training itself.

The importance of ongoing training and support for parents was echoed by Patricia Edwards, of Michigan State University. The "Home Literacy Project" (in process of being designed and implemented by Dr. Edwards) is a training program which attempts to respond to diverse parents' individual needs and concerns. Dr. Edwards observed, "Until the school knows parents as individuals and is sensitive to and willing to accept their individuality, it will be difficult to establish any communication between them."

III. Participation.

If this year's Roundtable conference was any measure, family and community participation in education is a hot topic. The majority of roundtable participants specifically addressed this theme. In newly democratized settings such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, for instance, family and community involvement are central to the reconstruction of their entire systems of education.

Even as home-school-community partnerships are being formed in Czechoslovakia, Jan Prucha notes that a principal obstacle to progress in this direction has to do with parent perceptions. Many parents do not trust schools and teachers, he says. These are the parents who did not agree with the Marxist ideology that had governed the schools, and who had developed a kind of "underground" education among families.

In a follow-up question about parent involvement outside of school as opposed to within school, Dr. Prucha said: "I mentioned it was something like underground in the sense that the parents wanted to teach their children the truth about national culture, about religion, and so on. And therefore they developed themselves some kind of education in the families. On the other hand . . . they are convinced that its just the province of schools and teachers to make children educated. I was reading some

materials published here . . . that the families can function as educators. It will probably not function in our present day situation, because the parents would be against saying that. . . ."

Vivian Johnson [of the Institute for Responsive Education, Boston University, and the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning]: "I just want to be certain that I was understanding the distinction that Jan was making. Are you saying that the underground was families' attempt to teach cultural learning, and that they want to retain that at home, while the academic learning – the learning of reading and writing and geography and so on – they feel is the job of the teachers? Is that the distinction you were making?"

Johannna Filp: "I understood that it was different, like . . . they taught at home the cultural contents that were not taught in school because of the regime that they had. That's what I understood."

Dr. Prucha: "Yes. Exactly."

Dr. Johnson: "That's what I was saying. So they want to keep that at home."

Don Davies: "In a way, families were very much operating as educators, but about important cultural, historical, and religious values rather than teaching reading. It's still, I would say, families as educators in a profound way, whether underground or not."

In her presentation, Mariana Dias of Escola Superior de Educacao in Setubal, Portugal, emphasized that training and support for teachers is needed to make full participation of parents in schools a reality. In Portugal as in other countries, teachers traditionally treat parent involvement as a marginal part of school activities. Dias argued that teachers need training and support to respond effectively to their new social and educational contexts. The "Working Together Project" will help train Lisbon teachers to reach out more effectively to families.

In Poland, as Jerzy Pomianowski of the Ministry of National Education in Warsaw explained, parent and teacher participation in school governance is being used as a means of overcoming some of the many barriers of a centralized bureaucratic system. His office used letters and mass media to reach parents and teachers, encouraging them to participate in the formation of non-state, independent schools. In one year, more than 200 such schools were created, reports Dr. Pomianowski. He says that the movement to form non-state schools is the first phase in their effort to restructure the nation's educational system in order to reflect Poland's new political reality.

Dr. Pomianowski says that these are not typical private schools, but are comparable to community schools in the United

States; perhaps he had Chicago school reform in mind. Parents and teachers who want to create a school, form an association, put its name in the register of the court, and they can be the owner of the school. A local school board then employs the principal and controls the budget. An example he mentioned of how the approach is sometimes in need of drastic refinement is a school that had seven principals in one year!

Partricia Bauch of the University of Alabama shared the results of her study, "Linking Parents Reasons for School Choice and Parent Involvement for Minority Families in Catholic High Schools." Dr. Bauch expressed her view that parent choice is a good thing if it links together different kinds of schools and different kinds of families. It's positive also, she said, to the extent that it helps schools become more responsive and more accountable.

Volker Krumm of the University of Salzburg in Austria reported on a cross-cultural study of parent involvement in children's learning in the United States, Austria, and Taiwan. Dr. Krumm's investigation focused on three questions: 1) To what extent do parents concern themselves with school problems; 2) How great is their desire to help? 3) To what extent do they see themselves as supported by teachers? One example of his findings is that while parents in the United States are more involved in education at school than Austrian parents, Austrian parents are more involved at home than parents in the United States. Dr. Krumm believes that home involvement is more important, because it has more impact on children's learning.

During the response period, following Dr. Krumm's presentation, Joyce Epstein made the following observation: "I think what Volker's studies show, in an interesting way, is some of the very difficult questions about cross-cultural comparisons -- how they are interesting, where they are interesting, and why it is very difficult to draw conclusions for them as if we could draw conclusions of what one country should do because of its comparison with other countries. We have to get that into our discussion, so that we can better understand where cross-cultural work is useful for drawing, certainly, policy decisions or for giving advice or for suggesting what should be done next and how. . . . I think what [Dr. Krumm] has done is open an agenda of discussion about cross-cultural work and also I think in integrating the work [other scholars] are doing and will be doing over the next several years on sort of different strains in different countries where we would say it is cross-national implications that might be drawn."

Don Davies: "Volker's work is very close to the first that I know of that's actually tried to do cross-national studies using the same instruments or the same results."

Raquel-Amaya Martinez Gonzales, of Universidad de Oviedo in Spain, reported on the results of a survey of forty Spanish families. Families were asked if they are interested in decisions made by their schools' parent associations. More than twenty-four percent say they are "always" interested; twenty-five percent say they are "very often" interested; three percent say they are "often" interested; about thirty-four percent say they are "sometimes" interested; and thirteen percent say they are "never" interested. Reflecting on her study, which included comments from parents, Dr. Martinez observed that whether out of fear or respect, parents are reluctant to cross traditonal boundaries between school and home.

At the conclusion of Dr. Martinez' presentation, Joyce Epstein emphasized the value of research which looks carefully at the impact of a specific kind of parent and community involvement on student achievement. Across continents, researchers in the International Network of Scholars are getting clearer answers to what strategies of parent involvement work best in which contexts. Overlapping issues and needs across continents suggest a rich area of exchange between researchers studying similar kinds of activities.

Yolanda Padron of the University of Houston made a presentation on "A Parent Education Program for Culturally and Linguistically Different Students." This study is one of the first to address the issue of how to structure culturally responsive teacher training for parent involvement.

Other participants in the Third International Roundtable of Scholars included the following: Katia Goldfarb of Michigan State University (who shared her observations on a Community Center in Katia, Venezuela), Nancy Chavkin of Richter Institute of Social Work at Southwest Texas State University (who reported on the "Coaltion for Pride" project), Patricia Ziegle Timm and Kathryn Borman of the University of Cincinnati (who spoke on "Using a Literacy Scale with At-Risk Families"), and David Williams, Jr., of Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas (who reported on the "Resources for Improvement" project).

IV. Looking Ahead

The Roundtable uncovered all kinds of diversity -- differing perceptions and perspectives, diverse ways of defining such concepts as partnership, community, and education. At the same time, a number of common themes emerged -- most prominently, academic and social success for all, transitions, and

participation -- and these themes cannot be isolated. The experiences, knowledge, and ideas of all those present at the Roundtable reveal how much scholars studying the impact of family-school-community partnerships in different fields and contexts have to learn from each other. For example, work being done on how to ease the transitions for preschoolers in Santiago, Chile, might benefit from current research on participatory parent training.

The interrelatedness of themes was also revealed in questions which resonate across topics: How can we help parents and teachers work effectively together to help all children succeed? How can a society's renewed investment in participatory decision-making pave the way for educational equity in schools? What can schools and communities and families do in combination to reach ethnically and lingually diverse populations?

Toward the end of the Roundtable -- after more than twenty brief presentations had been made and discussed -- participants were invited to put their heads together in a blue-skying session. Joyce Epstein asked how the International Network of Scholars could begin working together, exploring the cross-national interstices of family-community-school partnerships. "What are the kinds of things -- as you go about your work -- that we might keep track of in some special way?" she asked.

Johanna Filp suggested undertaking a cross-cultural study of where parents and students and teachers find each other and don't find each other. It was a theme that surfaced throughout the afternoon. We learned from Volker Krumm of the University of Salzburg, for example, that Austrian parents and teachers meet not in schools but in cafes. Jerzy Pomianowski enabled us to glimpse the fact that one way in which parent and teachers are finding each other in Poland is in the formation of new schools.

David Seeley of the College of Staten Island/City University of New York noted that many observations during the course of this year's Roundtable conference suggest that people harbor deep perceptions about what schooling is and how schools are organized. Dr. Seeley believes this is a fascinating area for cross-cultural investigation and comparison.

These are just a few of the possible opportunities mentioned for collaborative activity between Network members. Lively, informal discussion, card-swapping, and meeting planning caught fire at the conclusion of the Roundtable and continued over dinner at a Chinese restaurant.

V. Cultural Exchange

For many of the Roundtable participants the in-person networking didn't end at the Chinese restaurant, but continued for another week. With funding from the John D. and Catherin T. MacArthur Foundation, the Institute for Responsive Education was able to bring Roundtable participants from Czechoslovakia, Singapore, Chile, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Australia, and Austria back to Boston. Some of what happened during this week of extended exchange is captured in the following piece, which originally appeared in Equity and Choice, VII, 2, pp. 118-19.

Jan Prucha of the Institute of Educational and Psychological Research in Prague had a question. "There is one paradox that I cannot explain to myself about American education," he said. "On the one hand, you are a highly developed, industrial country and having excellent science and technology and so on. On the other hand, your schools seem to me to be not very systematic and not very effective for gaining knowledge and skill. How do you explain this paradox?"

Prucha came to the United States recently as part of a small group of educational scholars from different parts of the world. Having actively partipated in the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, they spent a very full week in the Boston-area -- hosted by the Institute for Responsive Education and the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning -- visiting public schools, exchanging ideas with scholars at a Havard University symposium, meeting with the Massachusetts Commissioner on Education, and more.

It was near the end of this two week immersion in the American educational scene that Prucha very quietly and earnestly raised that fairly loaded question -- which in paraphrase might go: How could the educational system of a world superpower have gone so wrong? It's a question that many Americans have been asking in one form or another, but it takes on a certain poignance coming from someone who endured four decades of totalitarian repression and whose recently democratized nation faces educational challenges unique to their situation.

The challenge in Czechoslavakia has to do with the fact that throughout four decades of communist rule, every student in the country was required to study Russian. The system is crowded with teachers who are equipped to teach Russian to Czechoslovakian students. Now, of course, Russian is not only no longer the required second language, it has become difficult to find anyone willing to study it. French, English, Spanish, or Chinese yes, but, at least for a while, no Russian, thanks.

The challenge is two-fold, Prucha explained: What to do with all these teachers of Russian? How to find qualified teachers of the many other languages that glastnost has made available to the people.

We learned from Ko Peng Sim of Singapore's Institute of Education that language acquisition is the issue in Singapore as well. The nation has four official languages: English, Chinese, Malay, and Khmer. While Malay is the national language, it is actually spoken by relatively few. English is used in the professional world, but Chinese is the most widely used language in a population that is seventy-five percent Chinese.

Education in Singapore is essentially structured around bilingualism. "Because we have to communicate with one another," says Ko, "our ministry appointed that all children are exposed to two languages since they are enrolled in kindergarten." Starting in kindergarten all children begin learning English, as well as receiving instruction in their mother tongue. If the mother tongue is Chinese, seventy percent of the child's instruction will be in English and thirty percent in Chinese. If English is the language used in the child's home, the child is exposed to Chinese seventy percent of the time and English during the rest.

Ko says that education is highly competitive in Singapore, and consequently parents are actively involved. "When the children have exams, usually the parents also have examination," Ko says, laughing. "They have to sit down with their children."

"Does parent involvement relate to all social classes?" Prucha wanted to know.

"Yes. It is because in a place like Singapore, everything depends on the grades you get for examination. So, for the poor people who want to climb up, the only way is for their children to get good results on the examination," Ko explains.

Not surprisingly, there was plenty of evidence during the weeks of cultural exchange that many issues in education are more or less unique to a given national and cultural situation. There was also a lot of common ground, and definite reminders that some things are simply universal. Crowded together with his fellow international visitors on a Boston elevator – an elevator that had just grumbled and stalled between floors – Volker Krum of Austria observed: "It's just like bureaucracy: It makes a lot of noise and doesn't go anywhere!" It may have been the volume of the knowing laughter that got the elevator moving again towards its momentary destination.

International Visitors -- Boston
Third Annual International
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